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ABSTRACT

The paper discusses the major second language teaching methods used to date in contrast with the strategies and techniques all children so successfully employ in first language acquisition. Second language acquisition for adults is not identical to first language acquisition but research seems to support the theory that it is similar. Successful second language acquisition was found to take place when adult second language learners were immersed in a carefully planned yet informal English environment. In the classroom students should participate in activities which require language use following similar strategies and techniques young children appear to use, such as language games, dialogues, and skits. The course should therefore be planned situationally rather than grammatically. (Author/CFM)

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FACILITATING THE IMMIGRANT'S LEARNING A SECOND LANGUAGE IN THE CLASSROOM

by W. K. Gallagher

Second language teaching today continues to be dominated by the belief that adult second language students must "enroll" in a course of study which has been grammatically planned (Diller, 1974). This course must present the adult student with thorough grammatical explanations in an order recommended by the author of the course. Phonological contrasts between the first and second languages must be isolated and drilled in order to eliminate interference from the first language.

Grammatical paradigms must be drilled at native speaking pace alone and/or with specific item substitution, and no error must go uncorrected in order to establish the correct new habits of the target language (Wardhaugh, 1970:67 and Moulton, 1975:9).

Much second language teaching today resembles the method of structuring and drilling Francois Gouin imposed on himself nearly one hundred years ago. Gouin, a native of France, was a teacher of Latin. In the late Nineteenth Century he wanted to learn to speak German. Believing that a language was a new set of explicit grammar rules, he set about memorizing a German grammar book. He returned to France the following year being unable to speak or understand spoken German even though he had memorized the German grammar, irregular verbs, roots and all the words in a dictionary of the German language (Gouin, 1880).

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When Gouin returned home he found that while he was in Germany his three-year-old nephew had learned to speak French without any apparent effort. Whereas Gouin was unable to learn

spoken German by rigorous self-imposed drills of the segments of language he felt were critical, his three-year-old nephew acquired spoken French with ease. Language acquisition appears to be essentially a mental process involving a neural language acquisition system which organizes spoken language into meaningful utterances. Language learning implies the study of a language and often the memorization of grammatical rules and vocabulary items.

Like Gouin, some language teachers have based their teaching methods on what they have been told about the nature of language, often by linguists whose goal was to describe language, not to outline teaching methods. Believing that language is words, teachers have their students copy and memorize vocabulary lists. Believing that languages are learned via imitation and analogy, teachers have their students mimic "key" phrases over and over again and wait, often in vain, for the analogy to set in. Believing that language learning is habit formation, teachers assign students to language laboratories for verbal drilling one hour per day, five days a week, as if practice of tongue muscles were the answer (Hatch, 1972).

In 1963, at the annual meeting of the Lingustic Society of America, Newmark and Reibel first made the extreme claim that acquisition of a second language is the same as the acquisition of a first language (Newmark and Reibel, 1973).

Research conducted at the Hawaii Campus of the Brigham Young University in 1975 showed that some students can make significant gains in acquiring English as a second language in a course operating under the assumption that first and second language acquisition are similar (Gallagher, 1976).

Thirty adult multi-national students in an experimental group in this research project spent fifteen weeks in an informal, although carefully planned, English environment. The program was one of total immersion, but was not "intensive". Total immersion signifies that the students were continually in an environment which maximized their participation in the English language. Therefore, instead of the typical classroom language learning situation in which the student is required to systematically study the structure and vocabulary of the language in the language, the students were placed deliberately in an environment which provided maximal attentive contact with and participation in the target language by way of meaningful, real-life situations. Examples of such situations follow. At all times attempts were made to take the adult language learner's mind off the task of learning the language.

Some of the presuppositions which characterized the research experimental program included:

(1) The introduction of language structures through meaningful, purposeful situations;

(2) Various experiences with real language;

(3) Consistent check on comprehension through normal conversational feedback;

(4) Careful programming of situations to stimulate communication;

(5) Use of language for necessary communication purposes;

(6) Use of small classroom groups for inter-group communication and association;

(7) Use of a variety of stories, songs, pictures, skits, and realia typical in the culture of the target language;

(8) Active use of the students' own creative and novel utterances rather than passive repetition of stereo-

typed patterns.

Questions not dealt with in this research included:

(1) Ways of assisting untrained teachers in adapting such a program as outlined in this experiment;

(2) The most effective ways of introducing reading and writing in the new language;

(3) More valid and valuable feedback and evaluation procedures for oral skills;

(4) Ridding second language students of their "foreign accents" by drilling specific target language phonemes.

While both the research control and experimental groups made significant progress in both structural and communication testing, the experimental group in this research, without grammatical structuring drills and over corrections, made significantly greater progress, when compared to a control group in communication skills, and not significantly different progress in structural skills when compared with the control group.

As a result of this research, the extreme claim that second language acquisition for adults is identical to first language acquisition must be re-evaluated. If one does assume that first and adult second language acquisition are identical, one might suggest that random and sporadic contact with the target language would be sufficient for adults as it is for children to acquire language. There could be no pedagogical plan of any sort since there is none for children. There would be very little, if any, explanation. All errors would be viewed as being developmental in nature and no attempt would be made to correct any errors. It seems self-evident that many adults would not be successful without some planning and assignments.

The opposing claim that second language acquisition is wholly different from first language acquisition from this research also appears to be wanting. Under this assumption, one might decide to lead the student through successive and increasingly difficult grammatical and pronounciation drills giving clear, complete explanation about the linguistic facts of the target language. One might also require the student to speak without any errors at native adult speed. All errors including "foreign accents" would be viewed as being caused by interference from the first language and would be overtly corrected. One might assume his students are motivated to study a second language because they wish to use the language to "get ahead", i.e., to get a raise or a better job, graduate from a foreign university, et cetera, rather than to assimilate with the target language culture as children are motivated to do.

What emerged from the Brigham Young University - Hawaii research, that first and adult second language acquisition are neither wholly identical nor wholly different from each other. But they are similar. Both successful adults and children appear to have very similar linguistic motivation, neural apparatus, amount of time for language contact, stages of language acquisition, and causes for linguistic errors.

A course which recognizes the similarity of first and second language acquisition must be carefully planned so that the student has some contact with and participation in the target language every day. This planning should be situational, involving situations in which speakers of the target language actually find themselves. One may require students to develop reports, make interviews, produce dialogues, skits and so forth with the realization that students often do not study on their own without any assigned work by a

teacher.

Clearly further in-depth research is still needed on many questions regarding second language learning. Longitudinal research with adults and small groups of children is still needed. At the same time, longitudinal research by foreign language teachers, second language curriculum specialists, and applied psychologists also is essential in order to test the usefulness of experimental results with learners at various developmental levels in a school-structured environment.

The results of the Brigham Young University - Hawaii experiment show that some adult second language learners can make significant measurable progress in English language skills when immersed in a carefully planned yet, informal English environment.

Specifically the following conclusions and recommendations may be drawn from this limited experimental research:

(1) Situational communication exercises such as language games, interviews, dialogues, and skits were shown to be sufficient in making statistically significant progress in both structural and communication skills.

(2) Planning a second language course situationally rather than grammatically, for example, introducing people before asking them to interview each other rather than presenting a lesson on the present tense before a lesson on the past tense, proved to be sufficient for significant target language improvement.

(3) Speaking to students normally, even slowing down one's speech and using less complex sentences when the instructor felt it was necessary, proved to be sufficient for significant skill improvement.

(4) Giving short ad hoc grammatical explanations when students asked for them or appeared to need them, rather than by course design, was sufficient for significant skill improvement.

(5) Correcting students by personalized echo-expansion technique was sufficient for significant skill improvement.

(6) Following a variety of activities designed to give student contact with varied target-language speaking situations proved to be sufficient for significant skill improvement.

(7) Both control and experimental groups made statistically significant progress and similar improvement. Both groups were also in contact with the target language, participating in target-language activities, for approximately the same amounts of time during the experimental period. The critical activity, therefore, appeared to be contact with and participation in target-language activities.

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